

VZCZCXRO6502

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DE RUEHTI #0196 0741617
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 141617Z MAR 08 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY TIRANA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6822
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEAWJA/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC

UNCLAS TIRANA 000196

SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EUR/SCE
DEPT OF JUSTICE FOR OPDAT, ICITAP

E.O. 12958:N/A

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SUBJECT: ALBANIAN GOVERNMENT CONDEMNS PARLIAMENTARIANS' ATTACK ON
JOURNALIST

REF: 07 TIRANA 137

¶1. In response to a public assault on a reporter by two Members of Parliament, senior Albanian government officials, led by Prime Minister Sali Berisha and Speaker of Parliament Jozefina Topalli, issued tough statements March 13 condemning violence against the media. In his statement, Berisha termed violence against journalists "unacceptable" and promised a "thorough and comprehensive" investigation of the incident. Topalli declared that she would act against the Parliamentarians in question, pending the outcome of the investigation. (The civic group, Mjaft!, also organized a small street protest.) In a televised evening statement designed to compel a reluctant media to give prominence to the story, the Ambassador also urged civil society representatives and journalists themselves to speak out forcefully against any such attacks on press freedoms.

¶2. The incident in question occurred the evening of March 10 in the Sheraton Hotel coffee shop when reporter Besar Likmeta of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) attempted to question Christian Democratic MP Tom Doshi about allegations that Doshi had faked part of his professional resume. Doshi, who was accompanied by Socialist Party (SP) MP Arben Isaraj, responded initially with verbal abuse and finally by striking Likmeta in the face with a leather binder, breaking the journalist's eyeglasses and opening a serious cut under one eye. Although there were several bystanders present, none intervened, perhaps in view of the fact that Doshi -- who is suspected of ties to narcotics traffickers and other criminal contacts (reftel) -- has a well-known history of physical assaults on critics. (He once beat a fellow MP in Parliament.)

¶3. COMMENT: The GOA's rapid and firm response to this episode is gratifying. Not so, the media's, which until the Ambassador's televised statement, citing our just-released Human Rights Report on media protections, did not for the most part carry the story at all. No doubt cowed by Doshi's reputation as a "thug," those newspapers who made mention of the incident buried it in the inner folds of the papers. Likmeta has since filed charges against his assailants. But until his fellow journalists show similar resolve in standing up to intimidation, the guarantees of press freedoms in Albanian law -- which in this instance the government moved decisively to uphold -- will remain hollow. END COMMENT.

WITHERS